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A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

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Ernest White, Esq., M.B., B.S., in the Chair

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**ANNUAL ADDRESS**

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**THE OBJECTIVE BASIS OF  
CHRISTIAN FAITH**

By

PROFESSOR MALCOLM GUTHRIE, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.S.M.

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

# THE OBJECTIVE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

By PROFESSOR MALCOLM GUTHRIE, PH.D., B.Sc., A.R.S.M.

There have always been some who have attacked religious belief on the grounds that it is based entirely on subjective evidence, but to-day more than at any previous time we are liable to be told religion is not worthy of thoughtful men because it has no objective facts to support it. In facing this criticism from the Christian point of view it would be possible to adopt an attitude based on a claim that the Christian faith is self-verifying, and therefore charges of subjectivity are irrelevant. Nevertheless any objection to our faith must be examined, particularly if it calls into question the very basis on which we stand. Moreover, if we were to hold that its validity is properly established on subjective evidence, we should have to take up an entirely esoteric position, which would among other things completely stultify the activities of this Institute.

It is worth reminding ourselves that many of the great Christian thinkers of the past were at considerable pains to find adequate answers to the kind of objection I have referred to. Unfortunately, however, when we read the arguments put forward in earlier times, much of what was convincing then seems to have little bearing on the questions as they are now framed. This is no doubt because we are confronted by a general situation that is in many respects unique. Perhaps the greatest single factor is the modern insistence on the need for factual evidence to which I have already referred, and it is often on these grounds that we are told that our faith will not stand up to present-day tests. As a preliminary then to a discussion of our theme proper, I must ask you to bear with me while we attempt to clarify this matter of "objective facts".

For most people the sacredness of what is presented as verifiable fact is beyond all doubt. Nevertheless for our present purpose it is important to recall that very different things are to be found put together into this category. While this does not matter in some ways, it may give rise to serious problems if these facts are to be used in the search for reality. As an example we may take certain typical things that are usually presented without any clear distinction of their status as objective facts. Thus it is said to be a fact that heat produces the vaporization of liquids. Similarly it is presented as a fact that the rings of the planet Saturn rotate in a given way. In another field it is accepted as a fact that in an earlier period there was an Ice Age over parts of Britain. In some circles it is equally claimed to be a fact that the human species evolved from earlier and simpler forms of life. It is immediately evident that, ignoring the general differences of quality and application in these things normally presented as facts, they do not in any sense have the same status.

Let us think for a moment about the statement that heat produces the vaporization of liquids. This is something that falls within the experience of all observers, and to that extent is not dependent on anything other than direct observation. It is true that to understand how it happens that heat turns a liquid into vapour may call for a great deal of specialized knowledge; nevertheless this particular behaviour of a liquid when it is heated can be regarded as typical of an objective fact of the most general kind.

In contrast to the kind of fact we have just discussed, the statement that the rings of Saturn rotate involves an important difference. This is because, although it is something that can be observed, it requires the use of special equipment before the observation can be made. As a result, such a fact lies outside the experience of most people, and has to be accepted on the evidence of other observers. This, however, introduces a fresh factor, since the status of the fact necessarily depends on the trustworthiness of those who claim to have made the appropriate observations. Naturally, important statements are usually based on a number of independent observations and in this way the reliability of the reputed fact is confirmed. Nevertheless it is a characteristic of a great many of what are regarded as the objective facts of modern knowledge that they cannot be verified by most of us, and we have to rely implicitly on what other people say they have observed. Moreover, even the fullest statement of corroboratory evidence cannot eliminate the necessity of taking many of the observations on trust.

The third kind of statement, such as that there was an Ice Age over parts of Britain in an earlier period, is actually of a quite different order from either of the other two, since it is based not on direct observation but on inference. It is clear that the use of inferences of some kind is a very necessary device if any sense is to be made of the multitude of observations made by different people. Nevertheless it is always essential to distinguish between the things observed and the explanations adduced to account for them. Naturally what is inferred may in the ultimate be objective fact, but there is no means of being certain of this. Thus all the evidence points to the occurrence of an ice sheet in some previous era over what is now East Anglia. For all practical purposes, then, this particular Ice Age may be treated as an objective fact, and indeed could have actually occurred, but in reality it is nothing more than a very likely explanation of certain verifiable observations.

We need not take time to discuss the inclusion among objective facts of complexes of hypotheses and speculations such as those underlying the statement that the human species evolved from earlier and simpler forms of life. Although this kind of procedure is not uncommon in presenting what is claimed as the body of modern knowledge, it is something on which no reputable thinker would insist, once the point is clearly raised.

Here, then, is the background against which we have to consider the challenge to produce the objective facts that form the basis of our Christian faith. As there is a considerable difference in the validity of the three main kinds of fact we have discussed, we shall have to state clearly to which type our Christian evidence belongs. Broadly we shall refer to the three types as "observed" facts, "given" facts and "inferred" facts.

Clearly we shall not expect to be able to claim that the basis of Christian faith consists of observed facts, since, if so, we could indicate what they were and there would be no further problem. Nevertheless there are certain things in this connection that are germane to our subject. It is a commonplace that the observations of different people do not necessarily agree, even in those cases where a single entity only is in question. Thus to take an example from my own field, it sometimes happens that an important point in the analysis of an exotic language turns on the difference between two rather similar sounds. Now this difference may completely elude the unskilled observer, who in consequence is probably unwilling to concede that the sounds in question really are different. Someone then suggests that the matter should be decided by the use of an apparatus that will supplement the direct observations. It then turns out that not only does the instrument require skilled interpretation, but that it actually records things that are irrelevant to the point under discussion. This creates a situation that is very common in dealing with linguistic observations, where it is the relevance of an observation that is fundamentally as important as its accuracy. As a result, the sceptical unskilled person finds no difficulty in rejecting equally the interpretation of what the instrument shows and the observations that the trained observer claims to make.

This kind of state of affairs also arises when the exponents of certain creeds find themselves confronted with reputed facts that are incompatible with what they believe. In such circumstances it is either the relevance or the accuracy of the unpleasant facts that has to be rejected. Unfortunately this is something of which certain people who are anxious to defend the Christian faith are not entirely guiltless. Essentially this problem turns on the extent of the area to which a creed refers. Any ideology which claims to cover the whole realm of nature and experience, as for example dialectical materialism, cannot ignore the challenge of any observed facts that seem to contradict its tenets. This, as we know, explains why some of its adherents have found it necessary to manipulate observations within established disciplines whenever they give the lie to its tenets.

What then really is the position of the Christian faith in this respect? Does it have something to say that relates to every realm? I take it that our association with this Institute implies that we think it does. Does it then display the same rigidity as certain other systems of belief? If so, then what happens when observed fact appears to conflict with its teachings? If not, then what finality does it have, and who is to decide what modifications shall be admitted? It is at this point that we encounter the position taken up by many Christians, which is that the basis of their faith is inferred fact. Not that this is explicitly stated, for the argument runs something like this. The Christian faith works in the life of anyone who will give it a fair trial. Since then everyone who genuinely puts it to the test finds that its claims are fully borne out in their experience, therefore it must be true. As the Christian faith equally claims to provide the answers to questions about ultimate reality, it must also be true in this respect.

Clearly this appeal to experience has a considerable usefulness for all whose task it is to persuade men to accept the Christian faith, but it leaves untouched the problem of the objective basis for such faith. Indeed, this is recognized by many Christians who contend that we need not worry ourselves about producing any valid arguments, since all that matters is that Christianity supplies the only answer to human need. Nevertheless there still remains the charge that if the only evidence for our faith is in the experience of those who accept it, then there is no guarantee that we are not suffering from delusions of some kind. While we can understand and even sympathize with the attitude of the person who says, "Even if I'm deluded, it's still worth being a Christian", we cannot but be aware that it does involve an evasion of the issues we are considering.

There have been of course many who have held that the operative word for the Christian is "faith", and since faith means accepting what you cannot prove, it is wrong anyway to bother about the question of an objective basis. This is a view that is still widely held, but it is one that easily exposes Christianity to a charge of obscurantism. It is worth pointing out that such a position is not consistent with the statement in Hebrews 11: 1, where faith is defined in terms of reality. Indeed, the clear teaching of the Scriptures is that Christian faith is not credulity nor adherence to a set of doctrines, but the acceptance of facts that are of the true substance of reality. It is for this reason, of course, that our theme to-day is a proper one to engage our attention, entirely apart from any questions of apologetics.

Some reference must be made in passing to the ontological and teleological arguments that have held the field at various times. Although attempts to prove the existence of God have been made along such lines by many thinkers, they lie outside the scope of our subject for two main reasons. On the one hand, even a valid argument to show that God exists would not provide any real grounds for asserting that the Christian faith has an objective basis, if only because belief in the existence of God is by no means confined to Christians. On the other hand, as all the so-called proofs that have been put forward are the results of inferences, they can at most never consist of more than conclusions with a high degree of probability, and probability is something quite alien to the Christian faith. Indeed one of the main difficulties encountered by many people when they approach Christianity lies in its categorical assertions about reality. Quite simply, no argument is admitted. The claims embodied in the Christian faith must be accepted or rejected. This then brings into sharp focus the need to show how such a system fits in with the demand for an objective basis, and that brings us to the other kind of fact that occupies so large a place in the corpus of knowledge: the given fact.

Perhaps it would be wise to point out the difference between the claims of what is called "revealed religion" and the kind of thing I have termed "given facts". There is more than one system in the world that claims to be built on the direct revelation of truth, but it is always a feature of such a faith that it holds that God spoke to certain people in the past. In effect there is no certain means of verifying that the people in question did really hear the voice of God, and were not subject to some kind of

hallucination. In other words, to rely on revelation of that kind is to be satisfied with a basis that is ultimately subjective. The difference in the case of given facts is that here there is always an observer whose trustworthiness may be assessed. Provided that it can be shown that he reports accurately, and that he is able to distinguish the things that really matter from irrelevancies, then the facts he presents to us are likely to remain unshaken. In practice this is just what we find, that given facts are in the main more reliable even than those we discover for ourselves. And it is just here that I suggest we find the true objective basis for the Christian faith.

On the scene of history there appears a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. Among other things that make Him stand out as unique is the extraordinary claim that when He speaks about unseen realities He is doing so as an eyewitness. He asserts that unlike other men He has come into the world from heaven, and did not begin His existence at birth. He says that He was a contemporary of a man who died centuries before. He speaks of God and angels in the way that one refers to a familiar environment. He talks about the nature of man and his ultimate destiny in terms that imply a full knowledge of all the facts. And in a breath-taking statement He calmly says that in effect it is impossible to distinguish between Him and God. Finally, after being arraigned on a fictitious charge, He offers no resistance, but is executed, and then comes to life again, just as He Himself has predicted He would.

Here then is a situation totally different from any other, which has been expressed in the form of a trilemma, as indeed it is. Unless it is possible to demonstrate that Jesus was either deluded or was deliberately making false claims—and the one fact that He rose from the dead disposes of those possibilities—then He must be taken at His face value. And that means that He is God, just simply that, neither more nor less. Once we reach this position, which is the only possible one, then we have the perfect eyewitness who can tell us all we want to know, or rather all we are *able* to know, about the facts of ultimate reality. It is, of course, in the acceptance of Jesus as the one whose given facts are totally reliable that what we term Christian faith operates. Nevertheless I suggest that while we need not deprecate the common meaning given to faith in this connection as accepting something on trust, in effect we are confronted in Jesus with an inescapable conclusion. While there is no question that many who do not accept His claims believe that they are sincere in their doubts, for my part I am certain that when all the facts are known, it will be seen that unwillingness to accept Jesus as God is always due to a dislike of some of the implications of doing so.

If what I have said about Jesus accurately summarizes the position, then certain things inevitably follow. On the one hand the basis of the Christian faith has an objective quality shared by no other system of thought. We do not believe in God because of any argument or preconceived idea. We do so because God Himself has reported His existence to us, not merely by revelation to any seer, but in person. When we speak of the creation of the world we are doing so not because it is in our creed, but because we have been told of it by the Creator Himself. We refer to

heaven, not as the Christian version of the Elysian Fields, but as the realm from which Jesus came and to which He returned after He rose from the dead. We have to accept the existence of hell, not because we cannot free ourselves from primitive superstitions, but because Jesus told us about it, and He must know. We know that as Christians we have a new and indestructible life, not because of any subjective experience, but because Jesus told us it would be so. We can speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, not as something that has been demonstrated, but as one of the "given" objective facts received from God Himself.

I am fully aware that the objector will retort that all this depends on the accuracy of the records about Jesus, and that this accuracy has been called into question. This is obviously not a proper occasion on which to array the answers to these points. Nevertheless, in the interests of our theme we may recall in passing that the central issue, the claim of Jesus to be God, if untrue, is so fantastic that the credulity required to believe that anyone invented it is vastly greater than the faith required to accept it. On this question, however, we should obviously not be surprised at attempts to discredit the sacred record, since anything which will enable men to avoid the plain issue centred in Jesus will always gain currency. We are sometimes told that in effect we have shifted our ground from an infallible book to an infallible Christ, but this is a ridiculous charge, since we have always known that Jesus was infallible, else He could not be God. Moreover we shall always maintain that as God came into the world at a fixed point in history, He must of necessity have ensured that there was an absolutely trustworthy record of His coming available to later generations.

One aspect of what I have said bears very much on the activities of this Institute. Since the objective basis of our Christian faith consists of facts given to us by the Creator of this universe, we know in advance that nothing that can be discovered will ever conflict with what He has told us. There is an absoluteness about our faith such that we might be tempted to say, if the facts do not agree with our faith, so much the worse for the facts. What we do say is, that when the facts seem to disagree with the basis of the Christian faith, then there is something wrong, not with the faith but with the things that look like facts. For these reasons, then, we shall continue to look fearlessly on all the discoveries that are made, knowing full well that the universe speaks with the same voice as the Christ, since it was made by Him. Unlike those who accept any other system, we shall never need to ignore or manipulate facts, since we base our beliefs on things given by Him Who knows all facts as they really are.

In conclusion, I should like to refer to the place of Christian experience in the scheme of things as I have attempted to outline them. Clearly our experience cannot be other than an integral part of the pattern of Christianity. Where then does it fit in? It seems to me that the answer to this question is found implied throughout the Scriptures. The teaching of the Bible requires the implicit acceptance of the objective facts that God has made known to us. Along with this there is a continual exhortation to us to adopt the right attitude to the facts that are given. And this gives rise to what I call the trident of Christian experience. At the one end

there are the objective facts, at the other the subjective, and the link between these is the attitude of the individual. Things being as they are, the given facts found in the Bible are unalterable; the only variable factor is in the people who are confronted with these facts. According as the facts are given their rightful place or not, so the result in the personality of the person concerned is inevitable. As an illustration of this I may remind you of the words of Jesus, " Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." The objective facts given to us here are God's kingdom and God's justice. The attitude we are commanded to take is to make these things our primary object in life. The result is that the necessities of life are guaranteed. From one angle, then, we might say that our experience confirms the objective quality of the Christian faith, but, as I have tried to show, it is not proper to speak of confirmation in this connection, since as God Himself in the person of Jesus is the source of our facts, they are never open to question. For this reason neither can the discoveries of men in the natural realm disturb the basis of our faith, nor can our own experiences establish it. It is founded on realities unfolded to us by Him Who is the origin of all reality, and indeed it may be that the basis of our faith is the only thing that really merits the title of objective fact.

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#### CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

Dr. WHITE said: We have listened with pleasure and with great interest to Professor Malcolm Guthrie's address, and we are grateful to him for sparing time in the midst of a very busy life to prepare and deliver the Annual Address.

The distinction he makes between three ways in which facts come to be accepted is of great importance as an aid to clear thinking. Of the three ways he describes, namely, direct observation, authority, and inference, by which we may ascertain reality, it seems that the last two categories are concerned in Christianity.

We first obtain our knowledge of Jesus by the New Testament documents. All that scholars have done to establish the authenticity of the original documents has added greatly to the weight of authority which leads us to believe in Christianity. As Professor Guthrie has demonstrated, the objective basis of Christianity rests in the firm foundation of Christ, His life, His teaching, His death, and His resurrection. We have here something much more than subjective experience. We are brought face to face with historic facts which challenge acceptance and demand interpretation.

All important as this is, I am sure that Professor Guthrie would agree that Christian faith rests on something more than belief in the historic facts about Jesus recorded in the Gospels. It is conceivable that a man might accept the historic facts, and yet not be a Christian. As Dean Inge points out in his book, *Faith and its Psychology*, in addition to belief in the historic Jesus, faith includes an apprehension of a living Christ. If faith were only a belief in an historic Person, it might become static, while faith in a living Christ renders it dynamic by bringing it into touch with a

living Power. It might be said that this experience is subjective, but surely some objective evidence for the reality of Christian faith is to be found in the effect it produces in the lives and conduct of those who claim it. All through the centuries of the Christian era down to the present time, the lives of men and women have been completely changed by their faith in a living Saviour. This is something more than subjective evidence. In his oft-quoted book on the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James states that the effects of religious conversion demand something more than a psychological explanation. He says that it is reasonable to assume that the sub-liminal personality has come into relationship with a Power greater than itself.

This is not the place in which to pursue this line of thought further, and we are grateful to Professor Guthrie for stressing the great fundamental fact that Christianity is centred in Christ. Herein it differs from all other religions. Most of the world's great religions have expressed belief in God; Christianity alone centres in a living Saviour Who once appeared in history to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. "Ye believe in God, believe also in Me."